

Citizens of the Empire: The Struggle to Claim Our Humanity

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Chapter 3: PATRIOTISM

In one of their “Campaign for Freedom” public-service television ads created after 9/11, the non-profit Ad Council captured the mood of a sizable segment of the American population in an ad that begins with a shot of a row of average houses. In somber tones, the voice-over says: “On September 11, terrorists tried to change America forever.” The shot fades into a new picture of the same street, this time with U.S. flags flying from every home. “Well, they succeeded,” the voice concludes, followed by the slogan of the campaign: “Freedom. Appreciate it. Cherish it. Protect it.”

For many, that was the patriotic equation: United States = Freedom = Flag. The conventional image was of a sleeping giant awakened, ready to assert itself in the world, its people brimming with a revitalized sense of patriotism. Such declarations came from virtually every politician and pundit.

And also, to the surprise of some, it came from many in the antiwar movement, who declared, “Peace is patriotic.” In the struggle to avoid marginalization -- in an attempt to find some rhetorical device that could get traction in mainstream America -- many who opposed the U.S. attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq did not argue against patriotism, but instead struggled over the way patriotism should be defined. When faced with the claim that patriotism meant supporting the nation as it went to war, antiwar organizers responded that dissent and critique of an immoral, illegal, and counterproductive war also were expressions of patriotism. These activists tried to distinguish between a reflexive nationalism (my country, right or wrong) and a reflective patriotism (my country, as we try to make it better), framing the former as inappropriate for a democracy and the latter as the best expression of democracy.

A similar debate went on within journalism. There were differences of opinion about whether journalists should publicly proclaim their patriotism and about how aggressive the questioning of officials should be in certain situations. CBS News anchor Dan Rather took flak for various hyperpatriotic comments he made after 9/11, most notably his Sept. 17, 2001, remark on the

David Letterman show: “George Bush is the president. He makes the decisions, and, you know, it’s just one American, wherever he wants me to line up, just tell me where, and he’ll make the call.”¹ But Rather was no doubt accurate when he told a newspaper convention in March 2002, “[W]e all want to be patriotic.”²

Bill Kovach, chairman of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, was one of the strongest mainstream spokespersons for a tough, critical journalism after 9/11. He did not trumpet patriotism, but endorsed the concept in his defense of journalists: “A journalist is never more true to democracy -- is never more engaged as a citizen, is never more patriotic -- than when aggressively doing the job of independently verifying the news of the day; questioning the actions of those in authority; disclosing information the public needs but others wish secret for self-interested purposes.”³ An editor at one of the top U.S. journalism reviews also implicitly endorsed patriotism in arguing that journalists serve their country best when asking “tough, even unpopular questions when our government wages war.” He distinguished “patriotism, love of one’s country” from “nationalism -- the exalting of one’s nation and its culture and interests above all others. If patriotism is a kind of affection, nationalism is its dark side.”⁴

I am against nationalism, and I am against patriotism. They are both the dark side. It is time not simply to redefine a kinder-and-gentler patriotism, but to sweep away the notion and acknowledge it as morally, politically, and intellectually bankrupt. It is time to scrap patriotism.

More specifically, it is crucial to scrap patriotism in today’s empire, the United States, where patriotism is not only a bad idea but literally a threat to the survival of the planet. We should abandon patriotism and strive to become more fully developed human beings not with shallow allegiances to a nation but rich and deep ties to humanity. At first glance, in a country where patriotism is almost universally taken to be an unquestioned virtue, this may seem outrageous. But there is a simple path to what I consider to be this simple conclusion.

What do you love?

If we use the common definition of patriotism -- love of, and loyalty to, one’s country -- the first question that arises is, what is meant by country? Nation-states, after all, are not naturally occurring objects. What is the object of our affection and loyalty? In discussions with various community groups and classes since 9/11, I have asked people to explain which aspects of a nation-state -- specifically in the context of patriotism in the United States -- they believe should spark patriotic feelings. Toward whom or what should one feel love and loyalty? The answers offered include the land, the people of a nation, its culture, the leadership, national policies, the

¹ L. Brent Bozell, “Media coverage at its best,” *Washington Times*, September 25, 2001, p. A-18.

² Mike Tolson, “Remain objective despite war, Rather tells Texas journalists,” *Houston Chronicle*, March 19, 2002, p. 19.

³ Bill Kovach, “Journalism and patriotism,” talk to the annual meeting of the Organization of News Ombudsmen, April 30, 2002. <http://www.newsombudsmen.org/kovach.html>.

⁴ Russ Baker, “Want to be a patriot? Do your job,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, May 2002, pp. 78-79.

nation's institutions, and the democratic ideals of the nation. To varying degrees, all seem like plausible answers, yet all fail to provide a coherent answer to that basic question.

Land: Many people associate patriotism with a love of the land on which they were born, raised, or currently live. People's sense of place and connection to a landscape is easy to understand. Most of us have felt that, and it's a healthy instinct; it is difficult to care for something that one doesn't know well or have affection for, and we have an obligation to care for the land.

But what has that to do with love or loyalty to a nation-state? Does affection for a certain landscape map onto political boundaries? If I love the desert, should I have a greater affection for the desert on the U.S. side of the border, and a lesser affection when I cross into Mexico? Should I love the prairie in my home state of North Dakota -- land where I was born and raised, and where I feel most comfortable, most at home -- but abandon that affection when I hit the Canadian border? In discussing connections to the land we can talk sensibly about watersheds and local ecosystems, but not national boundaries. And ties to a specific piece of land (i.e., the farm one grew up on) have nothing to do with a nation-state.

People: It's also common to talk about patriotism in terms of love and affection for one's countrywomen and men. This can proceed on two levels, either as an assertion of differential value of people's lives or as an expression of affection for people. The former -- claiming that the lives of people within one's nation-state are more valuable than lives of people outside it -- is unacceptable by the standards of virtually all major moral philosophies and religions, which typically are based on the belief that all human life is intrinsically equally valuable. It may be true that, especially in times of war, people act as if they believe the lives of fellow citizens are more valuable, but that cannot be a principle on which patriotism can rest.

This does not ignore the fact that we grieve differently, more intensely, when people close to us die. We feel something different over the death of someone we knew compared with the death of a stranger. But typically when we grieve more deeply for those we knew, it is because we knew them, not because we shared the same citizenship. We all have special affection for specific people in our lives, and it's likely that -- by virtue of proximity -- for most of us the majority of people for whom we have that affection are citizens of the same nation. But does that mean our sense of connection to them stems from living in the same nation-state and should be understood that way? Given the individual variation in humans, why assume that someone living in our nation-state should automatically spark a feeling of connection greater than someone elsewhere? I was born in the United States near the Canadian border, and I have more in common with Canadians from the prairie provinces than I do with, for example, the people of Texas, where I now live. Am I supposed to, by virtue of my U.S. citizenship, naturally feel something stronger for Texans than Manitobans? If so, why?

Culture: The same argument about land and people applies to cultures. Culture -- that complex mix of language, customs, art, stories, faith, traditions -- does not map exactly onto the mostly artificial boundaries of nation-states. Indeed, in many nation-states internal differences among cultures can be a source of conflict, not unity. In a society such as the United States, in which battles over these issues are routinely referred to as "the culture wars," it's difficult to imagine

how patriotism could be defined as love of, or loyalty to, any particular culture or set of cultural practices.

So, if one were to proclaim that patriotism was about attachment to culture, the obvious question in a nation-state with diverse cultural groups would be, "What culture?" Up until fairly recently in U.S. history, society's answer to that, implicitly, was, "the dominant white, Anglo-American culture." We were a melting pot, but it just always seemed to turn out that the final product of the melting process didn't change much. In an era in which it is widely agreed that people have a right to maintain their particular cultural traditions, few people are going to argue that to be patriotic one must accept that long-dominant culture and abandon other traditions. And to claim that patriotism is about respect for different cultural traditions is nonsensical; respecting different cultures may be a fine principle, but it has nothing to do with love of, or loyalty to, a nation-state.

Leaders: In a democracy it should be clear that patriotism cannot be defined as loyalty to existing political leaders. Such patriotism would be the antithesis of democracy; to be a citizen is to retain the right to make judgments about leaders, not simply accept their authority. Even if one accepts the right of leaders to make decisions within a legal structure and agrees to follow the resulting laws, that does not mean one loves or is loyal to that leadership.

Policies: The same argument about leaders applies to specific policies adopted by leaders. In a democracy, one may agree to follow legally binding rules, but that does not mean one supports them. Of course, no one claims that it is unpatriotic to object to existing policy about taxes or roads or education. War tends to be the only issue about which people make demands that everyone support -- or at least mute dissent about -- a national policy. But why should war be different? When so much human life is at stake, is it not even more important for all opinions to be fully aired?

Governmental structures: If patriotism is not about loyalty to a particular leader or policies, many contend, at least it can mean loyalty to our governmental structures. But that is no less an abandonment of democracy, for inherent in a real democracy is the idea that no single set of institutions can be assumed to be, for all times and places, the ultimate vehicle for democracy. In a nation founded on the principle that the people are sovereign and retain the right to reject institutions that do not serve their interests, patriotism defined as loyalty to the existing structures is hard to defend.

Democratic ideals: When challenged on these other questionable definitions of the object of love or loyalty, most people eventually land on the seemingly safe assertion that patriotism in the United States is an expression of commitment to a set of basic democratic ideals, which typically include liberty, justice, and (sometimes) equality. But problems arise here as well.

First, what makes these values distinctly American? Are not various people around the world committed to these values and to working to make them real in a variety of ways? Given that these values were not invented in the United States and are not distinct to the United States today, how can one claim them as the basis for patriotism? If these values predate the formation of the United States and are present around the world, are they not human ideals rather than American?

An analogy to gender stereotypes is helpful. After 9/11, a number of commentators argued that criticisms of masculinity should be rethought. Though the hegemonic conception of masculinity is typically defined by competition, domination, and violence, they said, cannot we now see -- realizing that male firefighters raced into burning buildings and risked their lives to save others -- that masculinity can encompass a kind of strength that is rooted in caring and sacrifice? Of course men often exhibit such strength, just as do women. So, the obvious question arises: What makes these distinctly masculine characteristics? Are they not simply human characteristics?

We identify masculine tendencies toward competition, domination, and violence because we see patterns of differential behavior; men are more prone to such behavior in our culture. We can go on to observe and analyze the ways in which men are socialized to behave in those ways, toward the goal of changing those destructive behaviors. That analysis is different than saying that admirable human qualities present in both men and women are somehow primarily the domain of one gender. To assign them to a gender is misguided, and demeaning to the gender that is then assumed not to possess them to the same degree. Once we start saying "strength and courage are masculine traits," it leads to the conclusion that women are not as strong or courageous. To say "strength and courage are masculine traits," then, is to be sexist.

The same holds true for patriotism. If we abandon the crude version of patriotism but try to hold onto an allegedly more sophisticated version, we bump up against this obvious question: Why are human characteristics being labeled American if there is nothing distinctly American about them?

The next move in the attempt to redeem patriotism is to claim that while these values are not the sole property of Americans, it is in the United States that they have been realized to their fullest extent. This is merely the hubris of the powerful. As discussed earlier, on some criteria -- such as legal protection for freedom of speech -- the United States ranks at or near the top. But the commercial media system, which dominates in the United States, also systematically shuts out radical views and narrows the political spectrum, impoverishing real democratic dialogue. It is folly to think any nation could claim to be the primary repository of any single democratic value, let alone the ideals of democracy.

Claims that the United States is the ultimate fulfillment of the values of justice also must come to terms with history and the American record of brutality, both at home and abroad. One might want to ask people of indigenous and African descent about the commitment to freedom and justice for all, in the past and today. We also would have some explaining to do to the people from nations that have been the victims of U.S. aggression, direct and indirect. Why is it that our political culture, the highest expression of the ideals of freedom and democracy, has routinely gone around the world overthrowing democratically elected governments, supporting brutal dictators, funding and training proxy terrorist armies, and unleashing brutal attacks on civilians when we go to war? If we want to make the claim that we are the fulfillment of history and the ultimate expression of the principles of freedom and justice, our first stop might be Hiroshima. Then Nagasaki.

After working through this argument in class, one student, in exasperation, told me I was missing the point by trying to reduce patriotism to an easily articulated idea or ideas. “It’s about all these things together,” she said. But it’s not clear how individual explanations that fall short can collectively make a reasonable argument. If each attempt to articulate a basis for patriotism fails on empirical, logical, or moral grounds, how do they add up to a coherent position?

Any attempt to articulate an appropriate object of patriotic love and loyalty falls apart quickly. When I make this argument, I am often told that I simply don’t understand, that patriotism is as much about feeling as it is about logic or evidence. Certainly love is a feeling that often defies exact description; when we say we love someone, we aren’t expected to produce a treatise on the reasons. My point is not to suggest the emotion of love should be rendered bloodless but to point out that patriotism is incoherent because there is no object for the love that can be defended, morally or politically. We can love people, places, and ideas, but it makes no sense to declare one’s love or loyalty to a nation-state that claims to be democratic.

Beyond patriotism

So, there is no way to rescue patriotism or distinguish it from nationalism, which most everyone rejects as crude and jingoistic. Any use of the concept of patriotism is bound to be chauvinistic at some level. At its worst, patriotism can lead easily to support for barbaric policies, especially in war. At its best, it is self-indulgent and arrogant in its assumptions about the uniqueness of U.S. culture and willfully ignorant about the history and contemporary policy of this country. Emma Goldman was correct when she identified the essentials of patriotism as “conceit, arrogance, and egotism” and went on to assert that:

“Patriotism assumes that our globe is divided into little spots, each one surrounded by an iron gate. Those who have had the fortune of being born on some particular spot, consider themselves better, nobler, grander, more intelligent than the living beings inhabiting any other spot. It is, therefore, the duty of everyone living on that chosen spot to fight, kill, and die in the attempt to impose his superiority upon all the others.”⁵

We can retain all our affections for land, people, culture, and a sense of place without labeling it as patriotism and artificially attaching it to national boundaries. We can take into account the human need to feel solidarity and connection with others (what Randolph Bourne described as the ability “to enjoy the companionship of others, to be able to cooperate with them, and to feel a slight malaise at solitude”⁶) without attaching those feelings to a nation-state. We can realize that communication and transportation technologies have made possible a new level of mobility around the world, which leaves us with a clear choice: Either the world can continue to be based on domination by powerful nation-states (in complex relationship with multinational corporations) and the elites who dictate policy in them, or we can seek a new interdependence

⁵ Emma Goldman, “Patriotism: A Menace to Liberty,” in *Anarchism and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1969), pp. 128-129.

⁶ Randolph Bourne, “War is the Health of the State,” 1918.
http://struggle.ws/hist_texts/warhealthstate1918.html.

and connection with people around the world through popular movements based on shared values and a common humanity that can cross national boundaries. To achieve the latter, people's moral reasoning must be able to constrain the destructive capacity of elite power. As Goldman suggested, patriotism retards our moral development. These are not abstract arguments about rhetoric; the stakes are painfully real and the people in subordinated nation-states have, and will continue, to pay the price of patriotism in the dominant states with their bodies.

The question of patriotism is particularly important in the United States. The greater the destructive power of a nation, the greater the potential danger of patriotism. Despite many Americans' belief that we are the first benevolent empire, this applies to the United States as clearly as to any country. On this count we would do well to ponder the observations of one of the top Nazis, Hermann Goering. In G.M. Gilbert's book on his experiences as the Nuremberg prison psychologist, he recounts this conversation with Goering:

"Why of course the people don't want war," Goering shrugged. "Why would some poor slob on a farm want to risk his life in a war when the best that he can get out of it is to come back to his farm in one piece. Naturally, the common people don't want war; neither in Russia nor in England nor in America, nor for that matter in Germany. That is understood. But, after all, it is the leaders of the country who determine the policy and it is always a simple matter to drag the people along, whether it is a democracy or a fascist dictatorship or a Parliament or a Communist dictatorship."

"There is one difference," I pointed out. "In a democracy the people have some say in the matter through their elected representatives, and in the United States only Congress can declare war."

"Oh, that is all well and good, but, voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them that they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country."⁷

If not patriotism?

An argument against patriotism raises the question of whether nation-states are a sensible way to organize our political lives. But if not the nation-state, then what? The simple answer is both the local and the global; politics must, over time, devolve down to levels where ordinary people can have a meaningful role in governing their own lives, while at the same time maintaining a sense of connection to the entire human family and understanding that the scope of high-technology and the legacy of imperialism leave us bound to each other across the globe in new ways. This is a call for an internationalism that understands we live mostly at the local level but can do that ethically only when we take into account how local actions affect others outside our immediate view.

⁷ G. M. Gilbert, *Nuremberg Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1947), pp. 278-279.

My goal here is not a detailed sketch of how such a system would work. The first step is to envision something beyond what exists, a point from which people could go forward with experiments in new forms of social, political, and economic organization. Successes and failures in those experiments will guide subsequent steps, and any attempt to provide a comprehensive plan at this stage shouldn't be taken seriously. It also is important to realize that the work of articulating alternative political visions and engaging in political action to advance them has been going on for centuries. There is no reason today to think that national identification is the only force that could hold together societies; for example, political radicals of the 19th and early 20th centuries argued for recognizing other common interests. As Goldman put it:

“Thinking men and women the world over are beginning to realize that patriotism is too narrow and limited a conception to meet the necessities of our time. The centralization of power has brought into being an international feeling of solidarity among the oppressed nations of the world; a solidarity which represents a greater harmony of interests between the workingman of America and his brothers abroad than between the American miner and his exploiting compatriot; a solidarity which fears not foreign invasion, because it is bringing all the workers to the point when they will say to their masters, ‘Go and do your own killing. We have done it long enough for you.’ This solidarity is awakening the consciousness of even the soldiers, they, too, being flesh of the flesh of the great human family.”⁸

We can, of course, go even further back in human history to find articulations of alternatives. As Leo Tolstoy reminded us in his critique of patriotism published in 1900, a rejection of loyalty to governments is part of the animating spirit of Christianity; “some 2,000 years ago ... the person of the highest wisdom, began to recognize the higher idea of a brotherhood of man.” Tolstoy argued that this “higher idea, the brotherly union of the peoples, which has long since come to life, and from all sides is calling you to itself” could lead people to “understand that they are not the sons of some fatherland or other, nor of Governments, but are sons of God.”⁹

In more secular form, this sentiment is summed up in an often-quoted statement of the great American labor leader and Socialist Eugene Debs, who said in 1915: “I have no country to fight for; my country is the earth, and I am a citizen of the world.”¹⁰

⁸ Goldman, “Patriotism,” pp. 142-143.

⁹ Leo Tolstoy, “Patriotism and Government,” online at http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bright/tolstoy/patriotismandgovt.html.

¹⁰ <http://bari.iww.org/iu120/local/Scribner12.html>.